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ABSTRACT

This analysis of underserved gifted preschool and primary children explores the identification of gifted children from the current perspective, examines the impact of current identification practices on underserved populations, outlines some promising practices for assessment, and summarizes implications for educational development when serving underrepresented populations. It is concluded that educators are now paying more attention to the needs of underserved populations with systematic research into issues of assessment, programmatic alternatives, curriculum integration, and evaluation. Stressed is the need to apply research findings to modify practice at the local, regional, and state levels and to develop assessment approaches which examine both performance and potential. Portfolio assessment is seen as one alternative strategy for identification of gifted children in underserved groups. A continuum of programmatic options is recommended based on identified student strengths. Changes in state and local funding procedures are suggested which would support a broad range of opportunities and services. (16 references) (DB)

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Identification of Underserved Populations: Focus on Preschool and Primary Children

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Introduction

Among the critical issues to emerge from an analysis of underserved populations in gifted child education are four key topics: identification practices, programmatic options, integrated curriculum development, and evaluation. This chapter explores the identification of gifted children from the current perspective, examines the impact of current identification practices on underserved populations, outlines some promising practices for assessment, and summarizes implications for educational development when serving underrepresented populations.

Current Identification Practices

Current practices for identification of gifted children generally use some combination of test data, either group or individual, and some form of documented superior performance, usually teacher information or grades. Diverse areas of giftedness (cognitive, academic, creative, and artistic) are examined through different combinations of test data and school performance. Educators of gifted children try to bring a quality of order to an imprecise process. The emphasis on test data provides a "defensible" position from which to include or exclude children in gifted programs. Standardized test scores are used to explain to parents and teachers exactly why a child is or is not identified.

It seems to be a prevailing belief in our society that if something is important, such as achievement, ability, or success, it can be objectively measured and quantitatively defined. As a result, education is becoming more and more measurement driven. The use of "cut-off scores" or "minimum IQ" or "achievement test scores" for gifted identification suggest that there is a significant difference between a child who achieves a score at the "cut-off" level and one who achieves a score a few points lower.

Although test data can provide information about a child, they cannot tell everything. For example, group tests cannot tap a gifted child's vast accumulated knowledge, problem-solving skills, speed of learning, manipulation of symbol systems, creativity, curiosity, and drive to know. Even individual measures cannot tell the whole story.

School behavior, specifically test scores and grades, is considered reliable evidence of giftedness in many districts. However, one must question further. Do the results of tests provide evidence of *characteristics* of giftedness, or are they perhaps evidence of very narrow and specific *products* of giftedness? The difference between characteristics and products of giftedness is critical as test data and school performance are used to identify gifted children. The relationship of characteristics to identification strategies is critical in attempting to identify those gifted children in need of educational intervention.

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Impact of Current Identification Practices on Underserved Populations

Traditional practices used to identify giftedness may not be adequate. As educators have grown more confident in the identification of gifted children through traditional means, they have begun to take a look at *which* children have been identified with those systems. Substantial research indicates that present identification practices result in certain populations of children being overlooked (Richert, Alvino, & McDonnel, 1982).

Certain groups of children, referred to as "underserved" or "underrepresented," have somehow been missed in the identification process. Preschool and primary age children, underachieving children, handicapped children, poor children, children from diverse cultures, children from minority groups, and adolescent females have not fared well under traditional identification systems.

These children, estimated by some to comprise up to 60% of the school age population, may exhibit characteristics of giftedness. However, their gifted behavior is not measured accurately by tests and/or is not recognized as gifted behavior in the school environment (Richert, Alvino, & McDonnel, 1982). Trust in the accuracy of a test score to describe something as complex as a child prohibits educators from looking at these children more closely. They may not look for giftedness in children whose performance on a test is less than the expectation of "gifted" performance. If educators do not think of particular children as gifted, they limit their ability to look at these children as such. The lens through which children are seen becomes narrow and cloudy.

Current identification systems have found exactly what they are predicted to find — high-achieving or high-performing students. However, reliance on test data as the primary factor for gifted identification is inappropriate, especially in light of current knowledge about child development and the attributes of gifted children. Academic behavior is a piece of information, but it is far from being the only criterion that should be used to determine exceptional potential or educational need.

Large numbers of gifted children should not be overlooked because of inaccurate or unavailable test data or poor school performance. The field of gifted child education must move beyond identification to assessment and necessary educational interventions. Assessment would provide data that would help to identify all gifted children, regardless of age, race, disability, gender, or income.

Promising Practices for Assessment

Substantial research supports the belief that the early years (birth to age 8) are critical to the child's development of self-esteem and self-image, social competence, emotional adjustment, personal values and habits, specific cognitive abilities, and achievement motivation. However, gifted children have traditionally not been identified during these early years. Identification of special needs and appropriate provisions in these early years are accepted practices in education when dealing with areas of exceptionality and should be extended to gifted children as well.

Similarly, intervention to prevent underachievement in gifted students is most effective in the first three years of school when perceptions, self-concepts, and behavior patterns are being formed. The time and effort required to reverse patterns of underachievement established in kindergarten through grade three increase substantially with every year that assessment and programming are delayed (Whitmore, 1986, 1988). There is no doubt that early assessment and early intervention are necessary elements in the development of young gifted children.

Among the most supportive efforts to appropriately assess young children is the position statement adopted by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC, 1988). The NAEYC articulated a clear and definitive statement with regard to developmentally appropriate practices for young children. Noting the necessity for assessment of individual development and learning in the process of planning and implementing programs, the position statement contains several important assertions regarding the use of standardized tests for the early identification of gifted and talented students.

First, standardized tests for young children are often selected because of availability rather than reliability. The basic requirement that standardized tests be reliable and valid is often not met when assessing young children. Indeed, the NAEYC emphasized that standardized tests should be used "only for the purposes for which data exist to support validity ... [and only] to benefit children in some way" (Bredekamp & Shepard, 1989, p. 15). Although most educators of gifted children would agree with this position philosophically, common practices used in the schools for testing young children are not consistent with this position.

Second, the NAEYC position statement gives further assurance for the development of educational programs based on inter- and intra-individual differences of young children. This position advocated the following: integrated development and learning experiences; engagement in active rather than passive learning experiences; relevant, engaging, and meaningful content; teacher-facilitated collaborative inquiry learning; and experiences that emphasize physical, social-emotional, and moral development. "A principle of [developmentally appropriate] practice is that the younger the children and the more diverse their backgrounds, the wider variety of teaching methods and materials required" (Bredekamp, Ed., 1987, p. 66).

Clearly, the strong position of the NAEYC can give support to persons in gifted child education working with diverse populations of young children. This philosophy can also give direction to altering current models of assessment and programs for underserved populations.

Models of Assessment

Overreliance on standardized tests to assess developing abilities has contributed substantively to the lack of student identification at the preschool and primary levels. If standardized tests are not the most appropriate means of evaluating potential or performance in early childhood, then systematic observation and recording appear to be. These methods can be used to answer specific questions, develop a more accurate picture of the child, gain a better understanding of behavior, and evaluate or assess behavior (Irwin & Bushnell, 1980.)

In practice, this means that the teacher should "know the child well enough to evaluate her abilities and achievements. Know the child well enough to place him on a continuum of learning and education that accepts his varying rates and uses mastery as the criterion of forward progress" (Greer, 1990, p. 289). To know the child well, the teacher will have to be knowledgeable of the attributes of young children and young gifted children, and will need to be a skilled observer of the child's behavior as well as an experienced practitioner who engages children in meaningful learning.

In an effort to address the concerns inherent in the assessment of giftedness in young children, several researchers have examined the use of portfolios (Hiatt, 1989; Shaklee, in press). As opposed to achievement test methodology, which imposes a unidimensional view on the interaction of instruction and assessment (i.e., a "one-shot" opportunity for performance),

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portfolio assessment occurs at the intersection of instruction and assessment in a continuous and sequential manner (Paulson & Paulson, 1990). In addition to being more representative of a child's ability than a one-time evaluation, portfolio assessment helps circumvent the bias that may be inherent in particular tests.

Portfolios are designed to aggregate a "picture" of the child's performance and potential. Furthermore, portfolio assessment provides a framework for decision making with regard to the curriculum strategies and interventions designed for a child or groups of children exhibiting similar skills and potentials. Finally, the portfolio can provide information useful for program evaluation. The program evaluator can report the degree to which there is congruence between the student portfolios and the program rationale, goals, curriculum, and standards (Paulson & Paulson, 1990).

Systematic use of portfolio assessment for the identification of exceptional potential is being examined by Kent State University's Early Assessment for Exceptional Potential project (Shaklee, Whitmore, Barton, Barbour, Ambrose, & Viechnicki, 1989). This model is based on using developmentally appropriate and ecologically valid observations of children in the classroom. It combines the use of observation strategies with multiple data sources in an ongoing assessment structure.

Teachers are prepared through a series of staff development meetings to collect six types of evidence from four audiences (parent/community members, teachers, students, and peers) over a six-week time frame. The evidence includes (1) anecdotal records (one per child per week); (2) observations of students during six sample lessons that are selected to elicit evidence of exceptional potential; (3) a combined peer and self nomination; (4) a home-community survey; and (5) examples of products produced by the child, which can be selected by the child, the teacher, and/or the parent.

The portfolio is collected for all children in the primary classroom. Teachers assess the evidence of exceptional potential in four areas: exceptional learner of knowledge, exceptional user of knowledge, exceptional generator of knowledge, and exceptional motivation for learning. Based on individual/group profiles, primary teachers make adaptations and modifications in the curriculum and environment to support the development of student potential.

Key elements contributing to the successful use of the portfolio for the identification of exceptional potential in young children include (1) development of teacher ownership in the process; (2) systematic staff development for primary classroom teachers; (3) congruence between the primary identifiers of exceptional potential, data collection procedures, and curriculum modifications; and (4) continuous formative evaluation and summation of the portfolio process from the student and teacher perspectives.

Summary

It appears that gifted child educators are paying closer attention to the needs of underserved populations. Systematic research is being conducted to address the issues of assessment, programmatic alternatives, curriculum integration, and evaluation. However, the research is only meaningful if it is used to modify practice at the local, regional, and state levels.

The issue of appropriate identification of performance and potential of gifted children must be addressed. When current identification practices do not appropriately identify and, therefore, serve historically underrepresented

populations, these practices must be redefined (Frasier, 1991). Conceptions of giftedness must be expanded, and identification procedures must be broadened to include the assessment of both performance and potential. Portfolio assessment provides an alternative strategy for the identification of exceptional potential in young children and provides greater assurance that gifted children in underserved groups will be identified.

In addition, as assessment procedures are redefined, programmatic options must be addressed. A continuum of options should be provided to students based on identified student strengths. These services, including direct and indirect services, should encompass the widest possible appropriate modifications of curriculum and environment to develop the child's talent.

A related consideration to both appropriate assessment and developmentally appropriate programs for young children and other underrepresented populations is state and local funding. Funding should be available not for a narrowly prescribed set of students but for the broadest possible range of opportunities and services provided to students who exhibit both the performance aspects of giftedness and the potential to develop performance attributed to giftedness.

This is an exciting time in the field of gifted child education. Educators have an opportunity to examine and change the field in order to better serve children; they have an opportunity to make a difference. It is up to each educator to become an advocate for appropriate assessment and developmentally appropriate programs. It is up to all educators to "know our children well enough" (Greer, 1990, p. 289).

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